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*Assessment of Probable North Vietnamese Political Strategy
over the Next Six Months*

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
31 March 1972

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

**ASSESSMENT OF PROBABLE NORTH VIETNAMESE
POLITICAL STRATEGY OVER THE NEXT SIX MONTHS**

1. Hanoi has always given high priority to the political side of its revolutionary struggle. This has involved efforts to organize and stimulate mass opposition to the GVN within South Vietnam, and to maintain popular support at home in the North for a prolonged conflict. On the international scene, it has involved efforts to manipulate world opinion in order to isolate the GVN and to intensify US domestic opposition to the war, and attempts through negotiations to obtain a US withdrawal under conditions favoring the disintegration of the GVN. In Laos and Cambodia, North Vietnamese goals will continue to be principally building the national and international prestige of the local Communist movements and eroding the political prestige and stability of the non-Communist governments.

2. Hanoi has recognized in recent years that its political strategy has been losing its effectiveness in the face of Allied progress in pacification and Vietnamization, and in the absence of demonstrated military success. At the moment, however, there is no sign that Hanoi plans any dramatic shifts or changes in its basic approach on the political side. Current directives in the COSVN area, for example, are still exhorting the cadre "to motivate the people for a long-term continuous struggle," to lay the groundwork for a spontaneous uprising, and generally to accelerate the political struggle movement. Given the admitted failure of the cadre to make much progress in these tasks over the past several years, these current injunctions appear more exhortatory than programatic.

3. On the diplomatic front, there is also no visible indication of any marked shift in Hanoi's strategy. Hanoi is concerned about the accelerating Sino-American thaw and is devoting considerable effort to ensuring that both of its major allies -- China and the USSR -- stand firmly behind the war effort. In Paris, there is no indication that the Vietnamese Communists are yet ready to make any significant concessions to move the talks forward, although a repackaging of Communist proposals is always possible.

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4. The North Vietnamese can be expected to continue and intensify over the next six months certain public relations and image-building campaigns which they have already begun. They will work to gain increasing recognition from non-Communist nations and to broaden, where possible, foreign trade and cultural ties with third countries. To the extent that such efforts are successful, they may cause substantial discomfort to the GVN. The North Vietnamese will also probably use the next six months to invite increasing numbers of Americans to North Vietnam and in other ways seek to obtain sympathy for their cause and more support in the United States. Most importantly, Hanoi almost certainly will markedly intensify its campaign against the US air war in all its aspects. As the air effort becomes progressively the principal form of combat in which the United States continues to engage, Hanoi clearly will wage an all-out propaganda and diplomatic campaign against it.

5. Basically, however, it appears that the Communists are marking time on the political side, waiting perhaps to assess the impact of their military campaigns over the next few months.

6. Hanoi's military actions, in turn, will be aimed at discrediting the Vietnamization program and creating an impression of undiminished Communist capacity for carrying on the war. By discrediting Vietnamization, the Communists would really hope to discredit President Nixon's whole policy on Vietnam; and this they would dearly love to accomplish in 1972, before the US presidential election. Under present circumstances, Hanoi probably sees little chance of a political collapse in Saigon within any reasonable period of time, or of any negotiation with the United States producing results favorable to Communist interests. Therefore, Hanoi's hopes for overcoming its opponents in Saigon rest to an increasing extent on removal of all US support for South Vietnamese (and Cambodian and Laotian) military forces. The Communists would almost certainly see an electoral defeat for President Nixon as the best means of achieving this result. At a minimum, they would like to see the evolution of a political mood in the United States that would compel whoever was elected to opt for immediate, total disengagement from Indochina. The reelection of the President in a climate similar to that now prevailing would face Hanoi with a continuation, for several more years at least, of US actions aimed at improving the prospects for Vietnamization. Hanoi would also see the President's reelection as providing four more years for the Saigon government to consolidate its position.

7. This is not to say that the North Vietnamese perceive 1972 as a "now or never" situation. Hanoi remains patient and apparently sanguine concerning its ultimate ability to outlast the United States and shatter ARVN's confidence. But Hanoi can hardly be complacent regarding the

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consequences of yet another year of indifferent Communist performance on the Indochina battlefields. War-weariness is already quite apparent in the North, and defects in the Communist political apparatus in the South are also of great concern. In addition, there now appear to be morale problems in the Indochinese Communist camp arising from the changing Sino-American relationship. Some significant military successes would help Hanoi's leadership in dealing with all of these problems.

8. In sum, the case for doing something substantial in South Vietnam, or Laos, or Cambodia -- and sooner rather than later -- must be a strong one to the leadership in Hanoi. Successful military efforts in 1972 would at least lift Communist hopes; and, depending on the magnitude of the successes, political soft spots in Saigon might be exploited, pacification set back, and Vietnamization discredited. More important, the war issue might be reintroduced into American politics, raising pressures on all candidates for a commitment to complete US military withdrawal from Indochina and opening the way for a variety of Communist negotiating ploys. Among the tactics that might appeal to Hanoi in such circumstances would be a call for a cease-fire tied closely to some prior political concessions for the Communists in Saigon. The North Vietnamese might sweeten such a proposition for the US audience by offering more explicit reassurances regarding prisoner return. The short-term objectives would be to terminate the US military role in South Vietnam and shake the confidence of the GVN leadership.

9. In Laos, North Vietnam in coming months may prompt the Lao Patriotic Front to make a political initiative separately from Hanoi's political effort in South Vietnam. A military success in the Long Tieng area would provide a useful backdrop for the return to Vientiane of Souphanouvong's representative, Souk Vongsak. It is likely that this would be little more than a tactical move designed to cause problems for the RLG with the United States. The Communist demands will probably continue to include a total bombing halt throughout Laos and the complete withdrawal of Thai forces from Laos -- and such demands will continue to be unacceptable to the RLG in the absence of progress toward a general Indochina settlement. In Cambodia the enemy will probably devote most of his political attention to efforts to legitimize the image of Sihanouk's RGNU/FUNK on the international scene.

10. It is even possible that Hanoi might attempt to reach an accommodation with Laos or Cambodia separately from a settlement in South Vietnam if it could perceive political or military advantages from such a deal. At the moment, however, it is difficult to visualize the terms of an arrangement with either country that would be acceptable to both parties. In Laos, Souvanna Phouma has taken a stiff attitude toward talks

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with the Communists and is not likely to accede to Hanoi's basic demands for a halt to US bombing of the roads and a free rein on the Plaine des Jarres. In Cambodia, Hanoi would certainly not settle for less than continued de facto control of its northern and northeastern base areas and for at least overland access to southeastern Cambodia as well. While Phnom Penh might tolerate base areas in the relatively unpopulated northeast, only a badly demoralized Cambodian leadership would concede the southeast to Vietnamese Communist control. Spectacular Communist military victories could change current attitudes in either country. Cambodia, in particular, might be easily shaken by major defeats. Capitulation by the Lao, however, even subsequent to military setbacks, might be forestalled by a rightist coup or intervention by the Thai.

11. If, on the military front, North Vietnam cannot achieve a degree of success in the next half year, this does not mean that policy changes in Hanoi are likely. A failure to gain militarily in 1972, however, combined (in the eyes of Hanoi's leaders) with a high probability that President Nixon would be reelected, could conceivably lead to meaningful change in Communist policy. The North Vietnamese are probably convinced that a change in the US administration offers them the best prospects of making their own objectives in Indochina attainable. But if they become convinced that this is not going to happen, we should not rule out the possibility that they might try other initiatives. It is possible, for example, that the North Vietnamese, while remaining determined to continue the war, might, sometime before the US election, reverse field and offer a return of prisoners for an immediate cessation of any US combat role in the war, in the air as well as on the ground, separating this from any political conditions affecting the Saigon government. Hanoi might calculate that this would be very difficult for the President to refuse during the election campaign, while acceptance of the proposal would enable the Communists to test Vietnamization once again in early 1973 under more favorable circumstances -- that is, without the presence of US airpower.

12. A new Communist initiative of this sort, though not a probability over the next six months, is at least possible. It is out of the question, however, that Hanoi would agree to any overall settlement of the war (except on its own present terms), even if it is unable to achieve some military success in coming months. The weight of all historical precedent, the total lack of evidence of any weakening in the resolve of Hanoi's leaders, and the inflexibility of these leaders who have been waging war throughout their adult lives -- all these factors must make any prudent observer conclude that Hanoi, come what may, is likely to persist in the war into 1973 and beyond.

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